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EDITORIAL

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Lake Lanier Is A Glass Half Full

By State Sen. Lee Hawkins



Today, Lake Lanier rests at 1,053 feet above sea level, roughly 18 feet below full pool. This time last year, Lake Lanier was only 10 feet below full pool. Yet, in spite of the present condition of Lake Lanier, I am far more optimistic about the future of Lake Lanier and the region that relies upon it for water supply, recreation and power generation than I was this time last year.

Last year at this time, Lake Lanier was laboring under fatally flawed procedures for operation of the Buford Dam and the control of water releases into the Chattahoochee River below. These operating procedures, referred to as the Interim Operating Plan or IOP, determined how the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would operate Buford Dam in order to meet the varied interests that rely on water in the lake itself and in the Chattahoochee River below the lake.

While serious flaws existed with several provisions of the IOP, its reliance on heavy winter rains to replenish Lake Lanier underpinned the entire plan and may have been its most reckless and insidious feature. In a time of climate change -- when Georgia, like other states, is experiencing historic, multiyear droughts -- relying on winter precipitation to make up for overreleases of water during the spring, summer and fall months is not prudent, and as evidenced by our experience last year, downright dangerous.

The good news, however, is that this year is not last year in terms of the operating procedures for Lanier. Late last year, under very direct pressure from Gov. Sonny Perdue and stakeholders in the region, the Corps and the United States Fish & Wildlife Service modified the IOP in several key ways. Now, even though we face a future with a Lake Lanier at precariously low levels, optimistically, I

believe the lake to be half full.

Getting the corps to propose and the USFWS to accept a new operating plan for Lake Lanier was no easy task. The governor and his team labored tirelessly, in the face of multiple publicity stunts from a governor to the west and stakeholder groups from the state to our the south, to convince the federal regulatory authorities responsible for the operation of Lake Lanier and the protection of endangered species within the basin that the IOP needed to be changed.

Through the governor's leadership, President Bush committed federal resources in an attempt to resolve the impasse which threatened the metro area's largest source of water supply. Secretary of the Department of Interior Dirk Kempthorne and Chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality Jim Connaughton were dispatched by the president to help broker a resolution.

While those negotiations did not produce an agreement between all three states, I believe we can credit Gov. Perdue and his team with a successful negotiation. The end result was a revised Operating Plan that provided, (a) a mechanism for the restriction of water releases from Buford Dam when lake levels fall far enough; (b) new rules that allow for the capture and storage of more water; and (c) different release minimums which will vary seasonally and allow for more storage in the winter months.

In short, these changes represent substantive and meaningful adjustments to the operating plan for Lake Lanier. For instance, the above-noted changes from the IOP to the Revised Operating Plan resulted in the ability to store much of the basin inflow that was a result of the rains from Hurricane Fay, thus raising Lake Lanier by 2« feet. Under the IOP, much of the additional basin inflow would not have been able to be stored in Lake Lanier and would have been released downstream.

While I am optimistic about the effect of these changes, we must continue to work toward a long-term solution for Lake Lanier. The Revised Operating Plan, although better, is not perfect. In fact, the state of Georgia and its regional allies have amended their complaints in the lingering court proceedings to address the remaining deficiencies in the Revised Operating Plan.

More importantly, the corps has agreed to move forward with the states on updating the antiquated water-control manuals. As the manuals are updated, the data will be gathered upon which a long-term operations plan can accurately be built.

Additionally, decisions regarding the entire system must be based on scientific, verifiable data, something that has not occurred to date. Operating a system as a whole in order to deliver adequate water for endangered species is one thing; operating a system to deliver minimum flows that have not been proven scientifically to be necessary for those very critters is quite another.

While there are very real threats and challenges ahead for the preservation and protection of Lake Lanier, I remain optimistic that our state and regional leaders have achieved significant results toward the protection of Lake Lanier and will continue to do so.

It is now our job to make sure no one in the federal bureaucracy thinks that responding to the clamoring of poorly informed stakeholders in neighboring states represents the path of least resistance.

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